

File ref:

County: Durham **Site Name:** **Backstone Bank
and Baal Hill Woods**

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, as amended.

Local Planning Authority: Wear Valley District Council

National Grid Reference: NZ 068399 **Area:** 46.5 (ha) 114.9 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50 000 87, 88, 92 **1:10 000** NZ 04 SE
NZ 03 NE

First Notified: 1987 **Date of Notification:** 6 November 1987

Description:

Backstone Bank and Baal Hill Woods forms one of the largest expanses of semi-natural woodland in west Durham. This is an ancient woodland with historical records dating from as early as the 16th century. The site also includes small areas of scrub and bracken.

The species composition of the woodlands is extremely variable showing a gradation from base-rich to highly acidic types. Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and wych elm *Ulmus glabra* are the main canopy species on base-rich soils with hazel *Corylus avellana* and bird cherry *Prunus padus* common in the understorey. Here there is a species-rich ground flora containing characteristic woodland plants such as dog's-mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, ramsons *Allium ursinum*, woodruff *Galium odoratum*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea*, wood crane's-bill *Geranium sylvaticum* and wood melick *Melica uniflora* with ferns including lady-fern *Athyrium filix-femina*, male-fern *Dryopteris filix-mas* and hard shield-fern *Polystichum aculeatum*.

On more acid soils the woodlands are dominated by sessile oak *Quercus petraea* and birch *Betula* sp., and the understorey is invariably sparse, comprising hazel, holly *Ilex aquifolium*, rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*. They have a relatively poor ground flora with creeping soft-grass *Holcus mollis*, great wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica*, false brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum*, wavy hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa*, broad buckler-fern *Dryopteris dilatata* and more locally, bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*. Unusually for a woodland in County Durham, much of the oak has been managed as coppice in the past.

In wetter flushed areas alder *Alnus glutinosa* woodland occurs with a ground flora including soft-rush *Juncus effusus*, meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*. Along Spring Gill there is a small population of the small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata*, which occurs close to the northern limit of its distribution and at unusually high altitude at this site.

Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*, bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and great wood-rush dominate areas within the woodlands which have been subject to recent felling. A small strip of scrub

dominated by gorse *Ulex europaeus*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and ash occurs beside the spillway of Tunstall reservoir.

Due to the richness and variety of woodland types this site is also of ornithological interest. Green and great spotted woodpeckers, redstart, blackcap, garden warbler, wood warbler, spotted and pied flycatchers and nuthatch are all known to breed here.